

Testimony

White House Conference on Aging Solutions Forum on Mental Health and Aging

**Schaumburg, Illinois
April 21, 2005**

Good Morning. My name is Ruth Waeltz and I am here today representing the Area Agency on Aging of Southwestern Illinois. I am pleased to have the opportunity to provide testimony on the best practices that have occurred in Mental Health and Aging in Madison County Illinois.

Having had the good fortune to be involved at the inception of the program ten years ago, I can tell you that from my perspective it can be summed up in two words; Collaborate and Coordinate. According to the American Heritage Dictionary the definition of collaborate is - to work together in a joint intellectual effort, to cooperate treasonably, as with an enemy occupying one's country. I included the second part of the definition because unfortunately many times mental health professionals and aging professionals almost seem to view each other as enemies. In preparing this testimony I began to reflect on the past ten years and what has occurred to get our Mental Health and Aging initiative where it is today. It started with open dialogue and a willingness to understand each others networks and the limitations and flexibility within each. This allowed us to get past looking at each other as enemies and begin the road to being collaborators working on the joint effort of providing mental health services to older adults in a forum that was acceptable and appropriate to their needs.

Now we get to the word coordinate which is – one that is equal in importance, rank, or degree; to harmonize in a common action or effort, to work together harmoniously. Ten years ago when faced with an older adult who had mental health issues, this did not happen, the mental health network would say to the aging network, "They're over 60 so it is your job to assist them." And the aging network response would be, "It's a mental health issue so it is your job to assist them." Unknown to them at that time they were both right. The aging professionals had the understanding of the aging process and how to work with the older adult to determine their needs and get appropriate

services in place for them. And the mental health professionals had the understanding and technical training required to provide the specialized mental health service needed. Once both of these professionals realized they were of equal but different importance to this older adult in need they were able to work together as a harmonious team. The role of our agency, as a planning and funding agency for older adult services, was not only to encourage and support collaboration and coordination by aging service providers, but to serve as an example by leading the way and helping to facilitate the process. I am happy to say that after ten years we are still continuing to grow and evolve in our efforts. We have seen the wonderful results that can occur when agencies work together to try and provide a seamless network of coordinated services. In the past year our agency has had the opportunity to help expand the Mental Health and Aging program in Madison County to now include counseling services to the caregivers of older adults. We were able to come together as a group and find the best way to blend our various funding sources.

As you have heard and will hear from my fellow colleagues from Madison County it is possible not only to successfully blend Federal, State, and County funding sources from the Mental Health and Aging networks but to coordinate our efforts as well to provide the best services possible to our older adult population. As I stated at the beginning of my testimony it can be summed up in two words: Collaborate and Coordinate.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our experience with you.